

ACCOMODATION FOR SPECTATORS

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While speaking about providing accommodation for spectators in an auditorium, Bharata, in the second chapter of Natya Shastra has laid down a very simple rule. Regarding the arrangement of seats he says :

‘Rangapithavalokyam tu kuryadasanajam vidhim’
NS : 2.92

The seats should be thus arranged that all the spectators assembled should be able to see the play being enacted on the stage.

This simple rule significantly establishes the correct relationship between the performing arena and the seating arrangement. In whatever way one may design a theatre or make arrangements for a performance the observance of this simple maxim is imperative. Whenever this relationship is described—may it be in literary works, sculpted panels or paintings—the basic principle underlining it is seen observed. Well before Bharata spoke about Sopanakruti Peethakam—staircase like seating arrangement for spectators of a show—it was in vogue in India. The earliest glimpses of which are found in Buddhist Jataka tales which belongs to 6th century B.C. or even earlier.

In many Jataka tales, while describing Samajja or theatrical performance, reference is made to seating arrangement. Around the circular performing arena—Samajjamandal—seats were arranged tier above tier. Chakkatichakke manchatimanche bandhimsu is the typical expression that describes the seating arrangement at different types of theatrical performances. In the Vidurapandita Jataka various visions said to have appeared in a magic jewel. One of the scenes was that of Samajja. Seating arrangement is described thus : ‘crowds are gathered here of men and women, see the seats tier beyond tier created in the jewel.’

Probably audiences might have been sitting on wooden planks tied firmly to free standing poles tier above tier. From there they might have cheered their favourite dancer like Janapadkalyani (Telapatta Jataka), the most beautiful one or the shameless Bhikkus like Assaji and Punabbasu might have spread their robes in the arena and invited the dancer to come and dance on it (Chullavaggo).

The Sitabenga cave carved in Ramgarh hill in Madhya Pradesh is termed as 'an Indian theatre of the third century B.C.'. All along the interior wall of the cave two benches, one above the other, are carved out for seating the people attending the performances particularly at the swing festival as the inscription in the cave states. Describing the audiences the same inscription 'written just below the roof of the cave on the northern side of the entrance' says:

'At the swing festival of the vernal full-moon, when frolics and music abound, people thus (?) tie (around their necks garlands) thick with Jasmine flowers.'

—T. Bloch

Decorating themselves thus, the gay audiences must have been making the cave fragrant with the scent of Jasmine flowers. In the nearby Jogimara cave the name of the famous contemporary cave dancer Devadasi named Sutanuka is mentioned who was loved by a sculptor or actor (Iupadakhe) named Devadine. Without obstructing each others visions the two rows of spectators accommodating themselves on the benches one above other must have been enjoying the performance going on the floor of the cave, a narrow oblong strip. In principle the seating arrangement in the cave is the same as seen in Jataka stories of the earlier period, seats tier above tier.

The Chullavaggo speaks of a tradition of organising dramatic festivals at hill-side or atop a hill. The term used in the Buddhist work is Giragga Samagga. Double storied Ranigumpha cave on the top of Udayagiri hill near Bhuvaneshvar is identified as theatre. There is a big courtyard in front of the cave marked for music, dance, drama performances as indicated by the famous Hathigumpha cave inscription of King Kharavela. Here there is no well defined seating arrangement. However upper and ground floor verandahs must have been occupied by the audiences. A very interesting throne-like structure is carved out in stone atop left side projection of the cave which might have been used by the royal personages or the priests.

But most interesting amphitheatre with very well defined seating arrangement has been excavated at the foot of one of the hills at Nagarjunakonda. On the four sides of a quadrangular performing arena a brick gallery has been constructed for accommodating the audiences. Even special

boxes for royal spectators are carved out on hill slope. Polished Cuddapah stone slabs covered the seats. A few seats were found incised like Dhana-Asana which mean the seat of Dhana or Dhanaka. Some archaeologists do see Greco-Roman influence on its construction. The brick-built galleries can aptly be described as 'Sopanakruti Peethakam' in the words of Bharata. Constructed in the third century A.D. the amphitheatre has a perfect seating arrangement.

A fragment of a running frieze containing a dancing scene, originally recovered from the Kankali Tila at Mathura and now housed in Lucknow Government Museum gives us an idea as to how the audiences used to accommodate themselves when plain ground was the place provided them to get seated and watch the performance. The people in the front-line are seen sitting and at the back standing. Performers and the audiences are on the same level hence this is the most natural and logical audience arrangement. This is most probably the most ancient and still existing audience accommodation pattern. At the performances of folk entertainers this audience arrangement reflected in the frieze sculpted around second century B.C. can be still seen. A very interesting small group of spectators is sculpted on the outer wall of the famous Channakeshava temple at Belur built by Hoyasala Vishnuvardhan. Here all the spectators are sitting on the same level probably because the group is small.

We do not know for certain if individual tickets were issued to the people desirous of attending the performance. It seems that people collectively use to contribute and invite the theatrical party to perform in the village. Because Kautilya in the Arthashastra says : 'one who does not contribute his share in a stage show shall not witness it with his people. If he listens to or witness it secretly he shall perforce give a double share'. Literary references indicate that audiences pleased by the entertainers use to shower on them money, valuables, cloths. No formal entry tickets were required. It was a sort of spot collection after the show was over. Both the modes are still in existence in rural India. The visiting troupe of performers used to stage plays to royal courts and they were generously rewarded by the King who naturally used to be the leader of the audience. Avadanashataka tells us a story of a Director—Natacharya—from Dakshinapatha who along with his troupe enacted a Buddha Nataka at the court of king of Shobhavati and was amply rewarded for it by the pleased king.

At the site No. 80 at Nagarjunakonda archaeologists excavated a thirtysix pillared hall. It had a raised platform as a stage and a make-up room—Nepathya Griha behind it. However there is no clear indication of seating arrangement in the hall. However if we take cue from the amphitheatre at Nagarjunakonda we may assume it might be having Sopanakruti Peethakam style of seating arrangement. However the most interesting thing is that the archaeologists found a number of terracotta tokens with the name

of 'Sarasika' engraved on it. Some of them contend that these tokens might have been used as 'entry tickets' to the dancing hall where Sarasika, the beautiful court dancer, used to perform. We do not know who these tokens were acquired from by the audiences—on cash payment or by the way of King's favour.

Again it is Bharata's Natya Shastra which provides detailed information about audience and audience-accommodation. He categorically states that it is audience response which determines the success of a theatrical performance. He also makes interesting reference to the rowdies among the spectators with the penchant for indulging in acts like shouting, noisy clapping, throwing stones, clods of earth, grass at actors out of sheer jealousy or hostility. Nobody as yet could correctly interpret the term 'Mattavarini' which is a part of stage in Bharata's theatre. However some scholars contend that it must have been a protective railing separating effectively audiences and performers. It seems possible when we read about hostile audience right in the Natya Shastra itself.

How was the composition of the audience attending the performance? Were men and women used to sit together or separately? The terms like Stree Preksha and Purusha Preksha in Kautilya's Arthashastra suggest some type of separation of audiences on the basis of sex. However, in general, it seems men and women used to sit together and it was a mixed audience at respectable public performances. Vatsyayana in his Kama Sutra advises a young lover to sit by the side of his beloved (or the girl whom he desires to seduce) while watching the theatrical performances and try to touch her.

'Prekshanake swajanasamaje va sameepopaveshanam Tatrayanapadish-tam sparshanam' 3.4.10

This is possible only in the mixed audience—when men and women sit together to enjoy theatrical performances.

Special type of seating arrangement is recommended for special class of audience. For instance Bharata says that the judges (Prashnika) appointed to evaluate the theatrical performance 'should neither be too near (the stage) nor too far (from it). Their seats should be at a distance of twelve cubits (six yards) from it.' (27.74NS). In Guttala Jataka we are told that the King sat on the throne in the middle of the Mandapa and 'women beautifully appparelled, courtiers, Brahmins etc. stood around him. The full details of protocol when King attends a theatrical performance is given in the Sangeeta Ratnakara (VIII. 1351-61). It can be well compared with the Ajanta fresco depicting the Mahajanaka Jataka. By the side of king we find a Vidushaka sitting, a fat pot bellied dwarf with protruding teeth. We find very interesting sculptural representations of a King or Buddha watching a theatrical performance at Amaravati. King has a big throne with back-rest for himself

and is flanked by two ladies or queens on comparatively smaller thrones. Foot-rests are provided to these three. Two more seats without back-rests are also seen on which are seen four girls sitting. No foot-rests are provided to them. They might have been princesses. This seems to be a private dancing hall or Sangeeta Shala (Malavikagnimitram) of a king attached to his palace. In front of them various entertainment programmes are seen taking place. In the Natya Shastra (XIII-206 to 215) Bharata has described various types of seats that the actors taking different roles should use on the stage. This gives us some idea of the type of seating arrangement, rank-wise, that existed in private Natya or Sangeeta Shalas of the Kings.

Kautilya advises the King to attend entertainment programmes with proper security arrangements. (Also see Kuttanimatam I. 757). According to the Harshacharita of Bana the theatre-lover, Sunga king Sumitra was killed by one Mitradeva while the former was attending a dramatic performance. The entry of pious people, monks was resisted by the audiences as seems from the story recorded in the Chullavaggo (V. 2.6). Once some Buddhist monks strayed into a theatrical festival at hill-side (Giragga-Samagga) which was being held near Rajagraha. Indignant people commented:

‘How can be Sakyaputtiya Samanas go to see dancing singing and music like those who are enjoying the pleasures of the world ?’

The matter was reported to the Blessed One who admonished the monks in no uncertain terms. Even works like Manu Smriti prohibit celibate students from attending dance, music performances (2.179). However these restrictions seem to have little effect. In a very interesting frieze sculpted on the plinth of famous Lakshman temple at Khajuraho we see a pot-bellied, bearded Guru enjoying a dance comfortably sitting on a Gaddi and reclining against a back-rest. The Guru and the dancer are accommodated in the canopy while audience, front-line sitting and back-line standing, is seen amusing itself with due reverence to the presence of the august one. In the Sristi Khanda of Padma Puran the following lines occur:

‘Muninam preyasi nari yuvati rupashalinim
Salankara Sashayyancha Datwanantafalam labhet’

It was considered a pious act to dedicate beautiful girls to ascetics.

A specious dancing hall, Ranga, used to be there attached to the house of Ganika. It was the duty of the Shulapal to arrange seats with back-rests for the audience (comprising of Sreshthi, Vanik, Vita and Dhurta) around performing arena (Kuttanimatam 1.68). Sitting there comfortably they used to watch the performance. It used to be small intimate group. Probably at one such gathering, general of the Pandya king Naradeva as crude gesture

of appreciation tried to deliver a loving slap on the cheeks of Rajanati Chitrlekha and the poor dancing girl lost her eye by its impact (Kamasutra 2.7.30).

Various examples of audience-performers relationship is recorded in the literary works. In the Dhammapada we come across a young man who fell in love with a beautiful female acrobat and started touring with her, performing himself. Rajatarangini tells us about a temple dancing girl who was taken into Royal harem as a queen (7.858). A beautiful Nati of Shiva temple became the queen of Assamese king Siva Singha when he saw her dancing. A very interesting example is recorded in the Kathasaritsagar. A Natyacharya named Labdhavara attached to royal Natyaveshma (dancing hall) eloped with the queen herself (Navam Lambak). In the Mahabhashya of Patanjali there is a very interesting reference to the audience-performers relationship. In the theatre when the members of the audience ask the actresses (Natanam Striyo) performing on the stage: To whom you belong? To whom? They reply: 'To you! To you!' Right from the Jataka tales, Kuttanimatam we find infatuated members of audience losing their hearts and wealth to the dancing girls, performing actresses.

In the second chapter of Natya Shastra, while describing the theatre architecture, Bharata speaks of four corner pillars termed as Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra Stambhas. Some scholars are of the opinion that these indicate the sitting position of four Varnas in a theatre. However some think that these are just symbolic names signifying that as society these are the four pillars of theatre. In the magnificent Kootambalam temple-theatres of Kerala somewhat raised floor-portion of the auditorium is reserved for the Brahmin class.

Many major temples in India are provided with dancing hall or Natya Mandapa for theatrical performances. The Navaranga halls of Karnataka temples particularly at Halebid and Belur built by Hoyasala Vishnuvardhana have very well defined seating arrangement. In the centre of the hall is circular dancing arena and all around stone platforms, one slightly above other, are arranged. They run all along the interior wall of the Navaranga hall except at the entrances which bring audience in.

Two interesting structures are worth mentioning here. One is situated near Sibsagar in Assam and is popularly known as Rong Ghar. It is a beautiful two storied stadium built by one of the Ahom Kings and is associated with royal Bihu celebration—Raja Ghoria Bihu. The Bihu is the folk dance of Assam associated with the fertility cult. Rong Ghar is the place where royal audience used to sit and watch the performances being held on the ground in its front. There are thirtyfive steps leading to the first floor. They are arranged in such a way that the elephant carrying the king and other dignitaries on its back could mount this flight of steps and reach the first

floor. On this floor there are two chambers measuring 29' x 40' and 10 x 20 respectively. Ground floor is just a replica of the first floor. At the top a Kumbhir is sculptured with a dancing female figure on it. Various games and sports also used to take place in the ground in front of this stadium.

Racch of Raja Man Singh Tomar situated at Barai-Panihal village near Gwalior is yet another interesting structure. In its centre is a circular dancing arena or raised stage. Leaving some space a circular bastion with rooms lining all along the inner wall are built. People used to sit on the ground around the stage and also on the top of the flat roof of the rooms to witness the performance. The structure is in very bad state of preservation and needs rennovation.

The most simple theatre arrangement is seen in and around Vrindavan in the form of Ras theatre. It is usually a circular platform, made of brick and mortar, with or without a throne for actors to sit on it. The hight of platform varies from Ras Mandal to Ras Mandal. Some of them have been provided with concrete roof above but this is a recent development. People used to sit and stand around the Ras Mandal to watch the Krishna Leela plays.

Similar type of platform is seen in the premises of Brihadeshvar temple at Tanjore and is called Kuravanji platform. They are in fact two platforms one round and one oblong. One for the king and his retinue and one for actors to perform. Audience used to sit in the spacious ground around the Kuravanji platform. These were open air theatres audiences sitting on the ground under the star-lit canopy of sky.

A beautiful simile is used by the author of the Rajatarangini while describing the dispersing troops which shows the plight of audiences sitting in the open air braving the elements. He says:

'...troops dispersed in all directions like a crowd of spectators in a theatre struck by showers of rain water.' VII. 1106-RT.